

Bicycling the Dalton Highway

The Dalton Highway provides unique challenges and adventures for bicyclists: the road surface is rough gravel for long distances, services are few and far between, and the road crosses true wilderness. Bicyclists must be in top physical condition, prepare thoroughly, have realistic expectations, and be flexible enough to deal with changing conditions.

Know Before You Go

- There is no public access to the Arctic Ocean.
- There are no medical facilities on the Elliott or Dalton Highways.
- There are no grocery stores, banks, ATM machines, camping supplies, or bicycle parts between Fairbanks and Deadhorse, the industrial camp at the end of the highway.
- Cell phones work only in the immediate vicinity of Fairbanks and Deadhorse.

Distances

From Fairbanks to Deadhorse, cyclists must first travel 11 miles (18 km) on the Steese Highway (Highway # 6), then 73 miles (117 km) on the Elliott Highway (Highway # 2) and 414 miles (662 km) on the Dalton Highway (Highway #11) for a total of 500 miles (800 km). Many bicyclists travel one way and then return by air or ground transport the other way. There are commercial transport services in Fairbanks that offer drop-off and pick-up: check with the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-327-5774 or www.explorefairbanks.com.

Elevation gains/losses

The elevation at Fairbanks is 436 feet (135m) while Deadhorse is near sea level. The highest point is Atigun Pass (MP 244) at 4739 feet (1469m). There are numerous steep, winding hills with grades of 10-12%. When polled, several truck drivers said that the uphill grades are steeper traveling south from Deadhorse than north from Fairbanks.

Description from Fairbanks north

Note: In this text, the initials “MP” refers to Dalton Highway Milepost numbers. The Dalton begins at its junction with the Elliott Highway, 84 miles (134) km north of Fairbanks, so add 84 to get true mileage from Fairbanks.

• Fox to the Arctic Circle: Elliott MP 0 to Dalton MP 115, 188 miles (301 km)

The Elliott Highway is paved to MP 73 (Dalton Highway junction). The first 90 miles (144 km) of the Dalton Highway is gravel. In this stretch, the highway winds through hills and boreal forest, with little level ground. Summer winds may be strong on higher hills above treeline. Between MP 4 and the Yukon River (MP 56) beware of steep, sharp curves with limited line of sight. North of the Yukon River there are several steep grades, especially “Sand Hill” (MP 73.5), “Roller Coaster” (MP 75.8), “Mackey Hill” (MP 87.2) and “Beaver Slide” (MP 109) among others. Paved surface begins again at MP 90 and continues to Coldfoot.

• Arctic Circle to Coldfoot: MP 175, 60 miles (96 km)

The road is still hilly, but the grades are less severe and numerous than those to the south. Following a long climb to Gobblers Knob (MP 132), the road descends steeply to the Koyukuk

River valley and Coldfoot.

- **Coldfoot to Chandalar Shelf: (MP 235, 60 miles (301 km))**

The road continues through the broad, relatively flat Koyukuk River valley. The surface is rough gravel from Coldfoot on, except for 20 miles of pavement near Deadhorse.

- **Chandalar Shelf to Atigun Gorge: MP 271, 36 miles (57 km)**

Going north the road climbs just beyond the “Farthest North Spruce Tree” at MP 235 from about 2400 feet (744m) elevation to about 1100 feet (341m) at Chandalar Shelf, a 10% grade for two miles. The road flattens out for 5 miles (8 km) across Chandalar Shelf before the final climb (12% grade) over Atigun Pass (MP 244) and the Continental Divide, an elevation gain of 1239 feet (384m). The highway then descends 1739 feet (535 m) in five miles (8 km) to Atigun Valley.

- **Atigun Gorge to the Coastal Plain Overlook: MP 356, 86 miles (138 km)**

The highway travels across the rolling, tundra-covered hills of the North Slope. Winds out of the south may be strong as far north as Sagwon (MP 348).

- **Deadhorse: MP 356 to MP 414, 58 miles (93 km)**

Crossing the Coastal Plain, the highway is mostly flat. This area, especially the last 20 miles (32 km) before reaching Deadhorse and the end of the highway, frequently has strong winds out of the north in the summer. Dense fog often blankets the coastal area, and temperatures may be quite cool.

- **There is no public access to the Arctic Ocean**

Once you reach the industrial camp of Deadhorse, you are still about eight miles from the Arctic Ocean. The roads leading through the Prudhoe Bay oilfield to the Arctic Ocean are guarded by 24-hour security checkpoints. The surrounding terrain is a vast wetland which is constantly patrolled by helicopter. Permits for independent travelers are not available. Guided tours are offered through the Arctic Caribou Inn (1-877-659-2368).

Road Surface

- The Dalton is 24 feet wide. Most sections have soft shoulders and steep embankments.
- The Steese and Elliott Highways are paved. The first 90 miles of the Dalton, and the stretch from Coldfoot (MP 175) to about MP 358 is gravel treated with calcium chloride.
- The Dalton Highway is a commercial haul road with steep grades (up to 12%) and some rough gravel surface, especially on the northern half.
- Road surface conditions vary greatly and depend on weather and road maintenance schedules. In dry weather, passing vehicles stir up blinding dust, obscuring vision for both the cyclist and any oncoming vehicles. Rain or road maintenance work (tankers saturate the road to prepare for grading) turn the surface to slick mud or to the consistency of wet cement. Some areas have sharp, fist-sized rocks, or gravel so deep that cyclists must peddle downhill, while other areas are hard and smooth. You will encounter all of these conditions over the 414 miles from the Elliott Highway Junction to Deadhorse.
- The Alaska Department of Transportation maintains the road and works on different sections every day. In addition, major road improvements may be underway in some areas, causing

delays. To find out about construction areas and road closures, contact the Department of Transportation in Fairbanks at (907) 456-7623.

Current Road Conditions

For a recording of current road conditions, call the Department of Transportation at (907) 456-7623.

Services

When it comes to services, the Dalton gives new meaning to the phrase “few and far between.” Plan to be fully self-sufficient. Yukon Crossing, Coldfoot, and Deadhorse are *not* towns: the first two are primarily truck stops and Deadhorse is an industrial camp that supports the Prudhoe Bay oilfield. There are **no grocery stores** or places to buy camping supplies or bike parts once you leave Fairbanks. The Pump Stations that support the trans-Alaska Pipeline are private facilities with no public services. The Department of Transportation Maintenance Stations have no public services. There are **no medical services** along the Dalton Highway.

You may be able to mail supplies ahead of time to either Coldfoot or Deadhorse. Contact the Postmaster at the following post offices to set up an agreement before sending supplies:

- Write to Postmaster, Coldfoot, Alaska 99701 or call (907) 678-5204. This post office is open only Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons.
- Write to Postmaster, Deadhorse, Alaska 99734 or call (907) 659-2412.

Services may be available at the following locations, although at times (usually October-May), some of these may be closed or offering reduced services. Make sure they are open when you need them.

- Elliott MP 5.5:
Hilltop Truckstop (907/389-7600): restaurant, gas, water
- Elliott MP 49:
Arctic Circle Trading Post (907/474-4565): snacks, water
- Yukon River (MP 56):
Yukon River Camp (907/655-9001): restaurant, hotel, gas, garage, water
Yukon Crossing Visitor Contact Station (BLM): current road conditions and other information
- Sixty-Mile (MP 60):
Hot Spot Cafe: restaurant
Public artesian water well (potable) and outhouse, undeveloped camping area
- MP 102:
Arctic Circle Bed & Breakfast (907/452-0081): lodging
- Coldfoot (MP 175):
Coldfoot Camp (907/678-3500): restaurant, hotel, gas, garage, water, showers
Arctic Interagency Visitor Center (907/678-5209 summer only): current road and weather conditions, travel information, exhibits and programs about the Arctic
- Marion Creek Campground (MP 180): fee camping, potable water, outhouse
- Wiseman (MP 189):
Chapel and public phone

Arctic Getaway Bed & Breakfast (907/678-4456)

Boreal Lodging (907/678-4566)

- Deadhorse (MP 414):

Arctic Caribou Inn (907/659-2368 or 659-2840): hotel, buffet style meals

Arctic Oilfield Hotel (907/659-2614): hotel, buffet style meals

Prudhoe Bay Hotel (907/659-2449): hotel, buffet style meals

Prudhoe Bay General Store (907/659-2412): snacks and general merchandise

Several service stations

Camping

Elliott Highway: Watch for private property. There's a state campground at MP 10 (Lower Chatanika State Recreation Site) and a public-use cabin at MP 62: contact the Bureau of Land Management in Fairbanks to reserve the cabin (1-800-437-7021 or 474-2251).

Dalton Highway: There are undeveloped camping areas at MP 60, on the hill above the Arctic Circle Wayside (MP 115), and Galbraith Lake (take the 4-mile access road starting at MP 275). There is a developed campground (fee area) at Marion Creek (MP 180), five miles north of Coldfoot. Most of the land along the highway is public, managed by BLM. Camping is permitted for up to 14 days in one site. Camp well off the road, as dust and flying rocks from vehicles can be a hazard. North of Slope Mountain (MP 302) the land is managed by the state but there are few restrictions on camping. On the Coastal Plain (MP 356 to Deadhorse) the road traverses vast wetlands and there are few pullouts. **There are no public tent camping areas in Deadhorse.** Camping is discouraged in Deadhorse because grizzly bears roam the area and may be encountered anywhere.

Please practice Leave No Trace camping!

Water Sources

There are few places along the Elliott and Dalton Highways to get potable water other than from some of the commercial facilities. **Water from all other sites should be purified.** Rivers and streams are muddy during spring runoff and after heavy rains. You may find water at the following locations:

Elliott Highway Milepost:

- * 0.4 Fox Spring
- 11 Chatanika River (Whitefish Campground State Recreation Site)
- 14 Willow Creek
- 18 Washington Creek
- 20 Cushman Creek
- 30 Developed spring; easily seen from road (just south of the end of the pavement)
- 37 Globe Creek
- 45 Tatalina River
- 57 Tolovana River
- 63 Turn-off on the west side of the highway which leads down to a spring-filled pool
- 70 Livengood Creek – **Do NOT drink.** Water unsuitable for drinking.

Dalton Highway Milepost:

6	Lost Creek
24	Hess Creek
43	Isom Creek
56	Yukon River
* 60	Sixty-Mile Artesian Well
79	No Name Creek
106	Kanutu River
114	Fish Creek
125	South Fork Bonanza Creek
126	North Fork Bonanza Creek
+ 135	Prospect Creek
140	Jim River #1
141	Jim River #2
142	Douglas Creek
144	Jim River #3
150	Grayling Lake
+ 156	South Fork Koyukuk River
165	Cathedral Lakes
+ 175	Slate Creek
* 180	Marion Creek Campground pump well
187	Minnie Creek
+ 189	Middle Fork Koyukuk River #1
+ 190.5	Hammond River
+ 191	Middle Fork Koyukuk River #2
+ 197	Gold Creek
+ 198	Linda Creek
+ 205	Middle Fork Koyukuk River #3
207	Dietrich River
211	Disaster Creek
227	Nutirwik Creek
242	West Fork Chandalar River
250	Spike Camp Creek
253	Atigun River #1
258	Trevor Creek
265	Roche Moutonnee Creek
271	Atigun River #2
288	Kuparuk River
291	Toolik Creek
298	Oksrukukuyik ("Oks") Creek
311	Spur road to access the Sagavanirktok ("Sag") River
314	Oks Creek (re-crosses road)
326	Spur road just south of the climb up Ice Cut to access the Sag River
330	Dan Creek
334	Cross the Happy Valley airstrip to reach the Sag River.

345 Grant Creek
358-408 The Sag River parallels the highway and is easily accessible from numerous points.
365 Pond

- * potable water
- + mining or other commercial use upstream

Note: From Coldfoot to Galbraith Lake, the highway parallels major streams and crosses many small streams. Water is easily accessible throughout this portion of the highway.

Equipment

Stove: Consider bringing a stove that can use a variety of fuels, including unleaded gasoline. If you fly to or from Deadhorse, you may not take fuel on the plane and the General Store in Deadhorse usually does not carry Coleman fuel (white gas), which is most commonly used for camping stoves.

Water Filter: Assume all water is contaminated unless otherwise marked. Purify water by using a filter capable of eliminating *Giardia*, using iodine tablets, or boiling for several minutes (which uses a lot of fuel).

Spare Bike Parts: From discussions with people who have bicycled the Dalton, one of the biggest problems is mechanical mishaps. **Bike parts are not available** on the highway. Allow extra time for delays. Parts can be delivered to Coldfoot and Deadhorse, but this is expensive and time-consuming. Carry plenty of extra chain oil to clean mud and dust from your chain frequently.

Hazards

Traffic: Although the highway is not busy by Lower 48 standards, the narrow road, industrial traffic, steep grades, steep embankments, rough surface and lack of hard shoulders all make passing vehicles more dangerous. In 1998, an average of 388 vehicles per day went by a site at the Yukon River (MP 56) over the three month summer period. Vehicles will raise dust and throw rocks, so extreme caution is necessary. Dust clouds will obscure your presence to other vehicles. Bright colored clothing and reflectors will help.

Bears: Alaska is bear country and a cyclist is more vulnerable than someone in a vehicle. Both grizzly and black bears may be encountered along the Dalton Highway all the way to the Arctic coast. All bears are potentially dangerous. Stop by the Alaska Public Lands Information Centers in Fairbanks or Anchorage, or the Yukon Crossing Visitor Contact Station (MP 56) to learn how to handle bear encounters and pick up the brochure, *Bear Facts*. Good information is available from the Alaska Department of Fish & Game website: www.wildlife.alaska.gov/aawildlife/bearfax.cfm. Report any encounters to a ranger or one of the visitor centers.

Insects: Biting insects can be overwhelming. If you are not prepared they can ruin your experience. Carry mosquito repellent (those containing DEET are most effective). We recommend a head net and mosquito coils, an incense-like product that you can use while in camp (purchase in Fairbanks at any camping supply or grocery store). Mosquitos peak in late June and July, but

biting flies (“whitesox”) and gnats (“no-see-ums”) are equally ferocious in August and early September.

Weather: Weather can vary within a single day as well as along the length of the road. Snow can occur at any time of the year, especially from the Brooks Range north. In 2002 there were major snowstorms in the Brooks Range on summer solstice, in early July and mid-August. Temperatures can get as high as 90° F south of the Brooks Range and warm weather is often accompanied by thunderstorms. In general, June and July are drier than August, but rainy days are frequent.

From late May until early August the Arctic experiences 24-hour daylight. The seasons are much compressed: even in late May there may be extensive snow cover, ice on the rivers, and below-freezing temperatures on the North Slope. Plants begin to green up in early June south of the Brooks Range and in mid-June on the North Slope. Autumn colors – and weather – arrive in mid-August and snow flies by late September.

Travelers in late May and early September should prepare for snow and temperatures below freezing north of the Arctic Circle.

Flash Floods: Heavy or prolonged rain can cause local flash floods anytime during the summer. Culverts and bridges may get washed out, or sections of road may get flooded. Do not attempt to cross flooded areas! In 2001 an entire tractor-trailer was swept away when the road failed at Lost Creek, MP 4. In 2002 multiple sections of road on the North Slope were washed out after a sudden massive flood, and travelers were stranded for several days.

How much time should I allow for the trip?

If your priority is doing it fast, you may want to consider traveling in conjunction with a support vehicle. The driver carries food and equipment, prepares meals, etc.

Most people travel on their own, carry their own supplies, set up camp every night and cook their own meals. Their time limits are set by personal schedules and limits on the amount of gear they can carry. Trip length ranges from 7-15 days. **An average of 43 miles per day is reasonable**, but this varies greatly depending on road conditions, weather, and personal circumstances.

Other Sources of Information:

Dalton Highway Visitor Guide, Bureau of Land Management (free on request) or visit the official website of the Dalton Highway <http://aurora.ak.blm.gov/dalton>.

Alaska Bicycle Touring Guide, by Pete Praetorius and Alys Culhane (includes Elliott Highway and MP 0 to 211 of the Dalton Highway)

The MilePost, Morris Communications Corp., Augusta, GA (updated annually)